CHOICES EVERY DAY

January 21, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Matthew 4:12-23

"I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life." -Deuteronomy 30:19

It was, you might say, a moment of truth. Very near the end of his long life Moses is summing up. He is about to die. He has led a band of recalcitrant, disorganized Semitic slaves through a desert wilderness for forty years. And now they have come to the river. From the tops of the nearby hills they can actually see it; and across, on the other side, the Promised Land. Moses knows that this is the end of the line for him. His purpose has been accomplished, his life is fulfilled. He's not going across the river with them. He knows - this remarkable man who has held them together, pushed, prodded, pleaded, scolded, threatened and loved them forward for four decades - Moses knows that the really difficult times are still in the future: that if this group is going to become a nation and survive in the future, it will have to discover new resources, new strength, new will.

And so it is a time for summing up, which is what Moses does for several chapters at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy. He goes on and on, repeating things they already know and have heard a thousand times before, every bit like a nervous parent about to send an adolescent child on a long trip. "Don't forget to brush your teeth; eat your lettuce; keep your shirt tucked in; don't talk to strangers; say your prayers; and oh - I do love you." That's Moses getting ready to send Israel across the river and into the future. "Do this and do that - don't do this, don't do that." And at the end of the discourse a wonderful conclusion:

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse: therefore choose life that you and your descendants may live."

What a fascinating thing to say! The choice to live is yours. The issue of your survival across the river in that frightening new place is a matter of your choice. You may encounter some very serious threats to your existence over there. There are very real risks. There are people over there, for one thing, who will not be happy when they see you. But your

survival is not going to be determined by them, or by fate, or luck, or genetics, or weather. You're in charge of life, so choose to live today, in fact choose life every day.

The remarkable thing about that sequence is that philosophers, psychologists, physicians, are still testifying to its truth and still urging people to choose to live. Doctors know that Hamlet's pronouncement is scientific fact... "To be or not to be: that is the question." Without the will to live, to be, all the medical expertise in the world will not preserve life.

Rollo May, a psychotherapist and wise observer of our life identifies this ability of ours to choose to be - as the distinguishing characteristic of human beings.

Acorns become oaks, kittens become cats automatically, May observes. "A man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices and his or her commitment to them." [The Courage to Create, p. 4-5]

The Courage to Be, Paul Tillich called it in one of the landmark theological works of our times.

It struck me as very important when I was struggling with my own vocation. Quite by chance I happened on a book by Dag Hammarskjold, the former Secretary General of the United Nations who died in an airplane crash while on a peace-making mission in Africa in 1961. Several years after his death his diary, a personal spiritual journal, was published under the title Markings. I read the book as I was trying to decide whether or not to go through with this ministry business and it has been important to me ever since. The book reveals a deeply thoughtful man who in the midst of his distinguished career as a civil servant struggles with doubt and uncertainty, occasionally depression and despair.

Hammarskjold wrote:

"I don't know who or what put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone or Something and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal." [Markings, p. 205]

There it is again: "Choose life." "Say yes to something."

"Choose life today," Moses said.

So one day they were fishing. It must have been early morning, or early evening. That's when I see people fishing at the ocean. The light is soft, slanted, the colors are pink and purple pastels. Peter and Andrew, brothers, are working with their net, the tool of their trade. They're in the water, knee-deep maybe. Jesus of Nazareth walks by, says "Follow me and I'll make you fishers of men." And, Matthew says, that is what they did. Left their nets and followed him. Later on the same thing happens again. This time the men are in a boat, mending their nets. They're brothers, James and John, their father Zebedee is in the boat too.

"Follow me." And immediately they left their nets, and father, and followed.

What's missing from this picture? What exactly is going on here? Didn't they at least fold the net and stow it in case this venture didn't pan out? And what about Zebedee? Does he have other sons to help him with the family business? Specifically, how are you going to eat? How are you going to put bread on the table for your families, men?

Maybe there's something else going on here. Maybe they knew Jesus, heard John talking about him. Maybe they were baptized by John in the river. Maybe James and John have never been away from home and are itching for adventure and anything will do. Maybe Andrew's having a mid-life crisis and Peter has been thinking for some time about a second career, going back to school.

It is a perfect opportunity for the gospel writers to tell us just a little bit about the human dimension, the struggle, the dark night of the soul, the conflicting demands of family, culture, livelihood, hopes and dreams, that goes into a major decision. But the story is maddeningly silent about any of that, not because it didn't happen, I think. Of course it did. Maybe all of it. It's not in there, I think, because Matthew knows we're human and we'll figure that part out. What he doesn't want us to miss is the deciding part: the power of that moment when a person chooses: the existential drama of deciding to be, to take charge, to commit, to venture, to choose life.

Matthew also keeps this encounter as lean as possible because it expresses something terribly important about Christianity: namely that it is fundamentally a matter of following Jesus and not believing things about Jesus. You would think Peter and Andrew, James and John, would at least ask who he was, his credentials perhaps. You'd think that the very least they should have asked when he said, "Follow me" is "Where? Where are you headed?"

Everything Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote became important in light of his execution by the Nazis as a result of his decision to join a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler. His work on this passage is breathtaking.

With the swastika rising on the horizon Bonhoeffer wrote about Peter and Andrew, but surely also about himself and his friends...

"Faith can no longer mean sitting still and waiting - they must rise up and follow him." [The Case of Discipleship, p. 53] And then he spelled it out: Cost

"Discipleship means adherence to Christ. An abstract Christology, a doctoral system, a general religious knowledge on the subject of grace or on the forgiveness of sins, renders discipleship superfluous. With an abstract idea it is possible to enter into a relation of profound knowledge, to become enthusiastic about it, and perhaps even to put it into practice, but it can never be followed in personal obedience... Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ." [p. 50]

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The word here is a relevant one for us. We practice our religion in a thoughtful way. Our genius as Presbyterians is that we insist on bringing our minds to church. We do not park our intellect - our critical faculty, that part of us that analyzes, critiques, doubts, examines - outside before coming to worship. We take seriously the Biblical mandate to love God with our mind. And so when Jesus says, "Follow me and I'll make you fishers of men," our inclination is to organize an adult education class to investigate.

"Following as a New Urban Life Style Alternative" or at least a support group or perhaps a task force to get Jesus to use inclusive language so that there will be no gender exclusivity in this fishers of men business. We want to understand and that's our genius, our contribution to the church catholic; but Christianity is not a matter of believing propositions about Jesus and when you believe enough of them join the church. It's a matter of somehow hearing him say, "Follow me" and then figuring out how to do that.

Now the problem here is not merely Presbyterian intellectualism. The real problem is that we live in a culture that does not value very highly the kind of selfless response, the risky following, the investment of one's self, one's resources and potential and future - which is represented in Matthew's account. In fact, it's quite the opposite. In fact, we live in a culture that has been celebrating acquisition as a noble purpose and almost poking fun at the altruistic selflessness of religious commitment for a decade or so. We have new wave psychological problems to solve with names like "Fulfillment Trap" and "The Unhappy Success Syndrome."

And yet you're here. You and I are here on Sunday morning at least in part, I think, because we know the bankruptcy of materialism as a religion. I think we know the smallness and emptiness of life no bigger than its own needs and desires. I think we engage in unlikely religious behavior, invest some of ourselves in altruistic activity, and get out of bed and come to worship on a January Sunday morning because we know that the issue is our own lives and the necessity of choosing to live them.

I think we know the tragedy of life lived for no purpose particularly, invested in nothing but personal amusement.

I have just finished reading a biography of Charles Edward Stuart, pretender to the British throne, who led a revolt of the Highlanders in 1745 and nearly succeeded. Bonnie Prince Charlie was his name and at the age of twenty-five his armies were defeated at Culloden, near Inverness. And he never did another important thing. It's a sad story. In his middle years, living as an unemployed King in various European capitals, he spends his life drinking, talking about the good old days and attending the theater.

"...night after night, having nothing better to do and nowhere else to go, he would betake himself to his private box where he would loll on a couch, refreshing himself from his flask - until at the end he became either disorderly or incapable." [Bonnie Prince Charlie, Fitzrony MacLean, p. 356]

The author quotes someone at the time who said:

"All the world has regretted that the prince did not fall (at Culloden) leaving an unblemished fame, that he did not ride back and die with glory." [p. 337]

How inspiring it has been to witness once again, the truth that the future belongs to those who are sure enough of themselves, free enough, to risk, to invest, to decide to be, to throw themselves into the struggle. How incredibly inspiring to watch those indomitable people, choosing life, in Poland, East Berlin, Prague, Bucharest - those people who stood on the edge of a very uncertain future and chose life. The head of Czechoslovakia is a writer, Vaclav Havel. A collection of letters he wrote to his wife before his emergence as a political power has been published recently:

"Only by looking outward, by caring for things that, in terms of pure survival, he needn't bother with at all... and by throwing himself over and over again into the tumult of the world, with the intention of making his voice count - only thus does one really become a person." [Context, "Letters to Olga," 1-15-90]

"Follow me and I'll make you fishers of men," Jesus said. Follow me and I'll give you your life - for in the decision to follow, you yourself are claiming your life, deciding to live it.

I was distressed to read in the paper last week an article about the continuing loss of members experienced by the Presbyterian Church and other mainline denominations. It referred to a new study by a University of Oregon sociologist which seems to conclude that people stopped going to church when the church stopped promising them heaven if they did and hell if they didn't.

The study said people don't see any reason to go to church if you take away the carrot and the stick. Now in fairness to the author of the study who I know, I don't believe the Associated Press writer had the foggiest notion of what the issues were. I don't think the report got it right. But he did reflect a kind of cultural truth about religion - namely that the reason for following Jesus or joining a church is to get into heaven when you die or to avoid going to hell; the basic motive for being religious is either guilt or fear. And that if you don't market it like that it won't work. I have to concede that when you look at the religious landscape and see who is succeeding numerically, it seems to be an accurate assessment.

But I also have to say that I have a suspicion that making a religious appeal on the basis of the individual's fears or guilt - or instinct for self-preservation - is, philosophically at least, not too distant from appealing to his or her vanity, envy, greed or fear of not being socially chic in market advertising of automobiles, suits and cigarettes. Besides it's not what Matthew tells us Jesus said when he was recruiting.

He did not say, "Follow me and I'll get you into heaven." He did not say, "Follow me or else." What he did say is - Follow me and I'll give you lots to do. Follow me and you'll find yourself spending your life and being grateful for the opportunity. Follow me and say yes to your life.

As I watched the film clips of the civil rights struggle around Martin Luther King's birthday last week, I couldn't help reflect how thousands of people heard the call of Jesus Christ to follow as a summons to commit themselves to the cause of racial justice. I reflected on the fact that the call of Christ does not always, or often for that matter, point in the direction of professional church work. In fact the call of Christ does not come as singularly and clearly as it did to Peter and Andrew. Rather it comes all mixed in with the life of the world, in issues of justice and compassion and peace which always reflect his priorities, his agenda.

I couldn't help reflect that the call of Christ always involves leaving something behind: in this case family, security and a comfortable living. In the case of civil rights we were called to leave behind a comfortable racism, prejudices and stereotypes and to actually begin to live in a new future of equality.

And I couldn't help reflect that everyone who ever thought for very long about this passage and this topic recognized that the call comes from Jesus, not ourselves: that he makes the invitation and confronts us at times and places where we are not expecting him: not just in church, at our prayers - but at work, selling stocks, changing a diaper, scrubbing a floor, driving a cab, performing surgery, teaching a class, writing a report, discussing a problem with a colleague. All of a sudden there he is - "Follow me." And the choice is really to live life by throwing in with him, by committing, by stumbling along behind, not knowing exactly where he's leading, but magnificently blessed suddenly with purpose and meaning.

So hear him: "Follow me and choose life."

O God, your call has come and we have sometimes not heard it, and sometimes we have heard and not wanted to. Forgive us, and help us know that you call us to fullness of life. In all our choices may we hear and obey your will for us: Thanks be to Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.